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Cath. Inst. for Int'l Relations at

Statement by Catholic Institute for International Relations on East Timor to the UN Decolonisation Committee

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Presented by Sally K. Levison

`A persevering dialogue, which I have called for in the past, is needed so that all parties which play a role in the life of East Timor will lay the foundations for a political and a social life in harmony with the aspirations of the people.'

-- Pope John Paul II, 1992

Chairperson and honorary members of the Committee,

The Catholic Institute for International relations has continued to monitor the situation inside East Timor since we presented our petition to your committee last year. It is a year during which we have continued, loudly and clearly, to hear the cry of the people of East Timor, especially it mothers, for freedom, for justice and for the return of their children missing and still unaccounted for since the Santa Cruz massacre of November 1991, in which at least 273 people died.

In their heart-rending appeal to the first lady of the United States of America last autumn, these mothers spoke of the `silence of this immense sorrow, [not] knowing where our beloved, martyred children are buried.' Yet they still knew where they stood: `We are a little people, frail in all aspects of life, but we wish to keep alive the flame of our resistance, which identified us as a free and honourable people.'

Nothing can be more distressing than the disappearance of one's child: the constant hope that each day brings of the longed-for return, the dashing of the same hopes as the sun sets without news, and the inability to mourn and come to terms with death - which might at least resolve the pain of the relentless incertitude of days, months, years of waiting.

Yet how many children have disappeared never to return in this ravaged land? How many more are yet to do so, whisked away by soldiers in the dead of night, beaten, tortured, disfigured, buried in unmarked graves?

How can we hope that the Indonesian military will change the habits of years of abuses, and take pity? In a letter last autumn to a friend, Bishop Belo spoke said `We are living in an environment of terror and pressure. The Indonesians are saying that they have already withdrawn battalions from East Timor, but it is not true. On the contrary they are increasing the presence of military units in all places.' ... `as long as there is not a reduction in military forces or reduction in military personnel, this is purely and simply a military occupation and dictatorship....'

CIIR is concerned for the safety, not only of all East Timorese people who choose openly to manifest their rejection of Indonesian rule, but especially of its representatives among the Roman Catholic Clergy. We are concerned for Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, apostolic administrator of the diocese of Dili. It has come to our attention that the Catholic Church has been placed under increasing pressure since Bishop Belo came to the assistance of those who took part in the Santa Cruz demonstration.

According to accounts both from the Bishop and clergy and religious inside East Timor, the Indonesian military regularly intervenes in church affairs, harasses church-goers with threats and accusations, and sows vindictive disinformation in a blatant attempt to discredit its personnel. There have been attempts on the life of the Bishop, as well as his clergy, and it is our view that they conduct their duties in a situation of daily danger. We know that neither the Bishop nor the East Timorese clergy fear death, and that they look to the martyred Bishop of El Salvador, Archbishop Oscar Romero for inspiration. Archbishop Romero was assassinated by death squads whilst saying Mass in March 1980. Throughout his life he spoke out fearlessly against injustice and oppression.

As Bishop Belo says, the current situation will never bring about UN approval of the integration of East Timor into Indonesia whilst (quote) `People still live in fear. They don't dare go out at night. Many people,

including the young are called for interrogations... If people talk about their rights, they are accused of being members of Fretilin, or the clandestine....'

The Bishop calls for autonomy to be granted to East Timor in which its religious traditions be respected. The referendum for which he called in 1989 is both `necessary and urgent.' As he says, `if the situation has improved, and people already live in calm and quiet ...why should we be afraid of a referendum?'

The issue of East Timor is political and can only be settled by careful and protracted negotiation. In recalling the UN Charter, which states that it is the sovereign people alone who should determine their future, we would underline that the UN mandate will be diminished if the East Timorese people are denied this fundamental right. We appeal to the Indonesian government to abide by the statement to which it gave its consent at this year's United Nations Commission on Human Rights, to `continue its investigations on those still missing [from Dili on 12 November 1991] and the circumstances surrounding the matter.'

Finally, we ask that Indonesia continues to dialogue with Portugal and the legitimate representatives of the East Timorese people including its imprisoned leader, Xanana Gusmao, under the auspices of the United Nations, with resolve and goodwill, to settle this tragic and unnecessary conflict. Let disappearances and abuses in East Timor end. Let the mothers grieve no longer.

Ladies and gentlemen, CIIR thanks you for your attention.